

A SERMON,
ON THE
SIXTH COMMANDMENT,

"THOU SHAL'T DO NO MURDER."

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A SERMON, &c.

ST. MATTHEW, C. v. V. 21, 22.

“Ye have heard, that it was said of them of old time, thou shalt not kill: And whosoever shall kill, shall be in danger of the Judgment.

But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his Brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the Judgment.”

IN these Words our blessed Saviour, for the instruction of his Disciples, enlarges on the prohibition contained in the *Sixth* Commandment. Why such an explanation was particularly necessary, we collect from the verse preceding. “For I say unto you, that except your Righteousness shall exceed the Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of Heaven.” The prevailing character of the Pharisees, is known to almost every reader of the Gospel, to have been *Hypocrisy*. An ostentatious pretence of Religion, without its inward influence. Seeking to cover their neglect of moral duties, by a strict and scrupulous performance of frivolous ceremonies. Resting on a narrow interpretation of the revealed commands of God, strictly obeying the letter, the more freely to counteract their Spirit. To obviate an Error so
great,

great, and to caution his Disciples against a crime so foul, our Saviour, in his Sermon on the Mount, related by St. Matthew in the chapter from whence my text is taken, more fully unfolds to them the real extent of several of the Commandments delivered to Moses; and particularly of the *Third* Commandment, the *Sixth*, and the *Seventh*. From these Expositions we learn, generally, that to suppose that nothing further is inculcated in the Ten Commandments, than what is expressed, is grossly to misunderstand their divine purport and signification; to interpret them as ill as the Pharisees did, and to shut our eyes against numberless moral precepts indisputably included under the terms made use of; thus with respect to the *Third* Commandment, "Ye have heard, says our Saviour, that it has been said by them of old time, thou shalt not forswear thyself, but I say unto you, swear not at all;" that is, if we conceive that when we are forbidden in the words of the *Third* Commandment, "to take the Name of the Lord our God in vain," that we are only cautioned against false testimony in a Court of Judicature, we limit the Commandment in a way that is unjustifiable; that we are equally forbidden by it to make any vain or idle use of the Name of God, and that (no less than the crime of perjury) the evil habit of swearing on trivial and needless occasions, is most pointedly and peremptorily expressed to be a grievous Sin; a Sin, for which in the Day of Judgement, "God will not hold us Guiltless."

In the words of my text then we have such an interpretation also of the *Sixth* Commandment, by which we learn, that if we think, a mere forbearance from the horrid crime of wilful murder, is all that is inculcated in it, we run a risk of falling into numberless Errors, and (for want of con-

consideration) of transgressing a law, the mere Terms of which indeed, we may shudder to think of. "In old time, says our blessed Saviour, ye have heard that it was written thou shalt not *kill*." By this Law, from the time of Moses, deliberate and wilful *murder* had been as far as it could be, checked and prevented, Punishments being provided adequate to keep men in awe; but many lesser species of Murder had (particularly towards the time of our Saviour's appearance) become, through the false interpretations of the Pharisees, scarce noticeable as Crimes. As long as *open Violence* was avoided, they assumed a Liberty of injuring their brethren often by hard usage, unkindness, inhumanity, uncharitableness. So that it was become necessary to tell men once more how much was included in this great command of God. That, "*Thou shalt do no Murder*," was but a comprehensive term for numberless offences against our Neighbour, and that in truth, to "*be angry with our brother without a cause*," was a crime equally as heinous.

In this way, may it truly be said, That Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil the Law: to teach Mankind how to comprehend the sublime precepts of the Ten Commandments, written as they were by the finger of God, in the glorious spirit of universal justice and moral equity: and by the enlarged explanation of our Saviour, brought to apply to every circumstance of social benevolence, charity, and goodness.

Taught then by our blessed Saviour himself, in what manner to interpret the Commandments of God, no Man need be long at a loss, how to apply his several actions and intentions, to some one of these divine Laws, to determine their piety or impiety; their morality or immorality. Thus, find-
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ing that the mere act of Murder, is by no means all that is forbidden in the Commandment under our consideration, he will discover that every action, that may, in the most remote degree tend to the destruction of his neighbour, is equally meant to be provided for. Now, according to the Eternal Wisdom and Providence of God, such is the frame of Man, in every respect "*so fearfully and wonderfully*" is he made, that it is impossible to describe on what weak and slender threads his existence oftentimes depends. Care and disquietude, sorrow and trouble, anxiety and distress of mind, are frequently as fatal as the poisonous drug, or the sword of the assassin. But in how many ways we are exposed to, and how much in each other's power we are, with respect to these calamities, no man can well be ignorant. Every connection in life, has its dangers. So that if we cast our views forth into the world at large, though we find, alas! (and especially in these days) numberless sad victims of *violence*, yet shall we find scarce fewer perhaps, lingering under the slower torments of mental anguish. Some bewailing the infidelity of friends; some perishing through the neglect of those they depended on—grey hairs sinking in sorrow to the grave, through the disobedience and undutifulness of children. Some wasting away in the flower of their age, stung to death by the perfidy of those on whom they had fixed their fondest hopes of happiness. If to these greater distresses, we add the discomfitures occasioned by the froward wills of some, and perverse dispositions of others, all which inevitably tend to shorten the lives of those that suffer from them, our consciences will naturally be appalled; we must startle to think, in how many ways this great Command may be broken; that to
abstain

abstain from actual murder is almost the least part of the precept we need attend to, this being in the nature of things too repugnant to our feelings, to require much reflection, but to learn, that every social duty is comprised in it, that as St. John tells us, "*He that hateth his brother is a Murderer,*" we must needs consider it with awe and attention, and bringing the several actions of our lives to the judgment, as it were, of this tribunal, fearfully pass on to some such self-examination as follows. "How have I borne myself, in the several relations in which I stand to my neighbours in respect to this Commandment? Have I by obedience to my parents, and dutiful attention, helped rather to prolong their days by comforts, than shorten them by pain? Have I, as a parent, so brought up my children in the fear of the Lord, and so set them an example of Christian virtues, as to put them in the way to preserve their consciences free from sin, and their bodies healthful by temperance and moderation? Have I, as a neighbour, done all in my power for my fellow creatures? Have I on all occasions sought to relieve their distresses, to heal their wounds, and shorten their afflictions? Or have I not rather done much to aggravate them? Have I not forborne to give when I had wherewithal? Have I, as I should have done, "wept with those that weep," or have I not rather turned away when I beheld them, and "passed by on the other side?" Have I tried to raise them that have fallen, or have I not rather triumphed in their misfortunes, and for some petty interest or other, tried to keep them down? Have I as a Christian, in all my dealings with the world, acted with that universal good will, love, and benevolence, which the Gospel requires, and so practised all its moral doctrines, as to have

have “ turned many away from their wickedness, that they might live ? ” Or have I not rather seduced others by ill example into sinful courses to the ruin of the health of their bodies, and the reason of their minds ? Have I not broken in on their peace by headstrong passions, and unreasonable violence ? ”

According as our Consciences shall answer us on the several heads, of such a self-examination, shall we stand acquitted or condemned before God, of a breach of this Commandment. Indeed how great care is required of us, to guard against all possible injury to our Neighbour, and especially in any way that may ever so remotely affect his life, we may collect from that Law among the Jews, by which even the killing of any man by chance or accident, was to be expiated by flight to some city of refuge*. For we may be *blame-worthy* if we do not, by every precaution, seek to avoid whatever may *accidentally* be the occasion of death to our neighbour. All *wrath, malice, strife, contentiousness, and hatred*, towards our fellow-creatures, all *causeless anger*, and *intemperate expressions* therefore, are carefully to be guarded against ; for though we may have no design of destroying our neighbour at the moment, yet as all animosities tend in their nature, to great and unforeseen effects, and may eventually be the occasion of his destruction, they are by manifest implication forbidden by the command. - And also it is strictly incumbent on us, not only to abstain from the foul sin of Murder, but to *preserve* and *defend* the lives of our brethren to the utmost of our power. If they are sick, to succour and assist them. If needy, to feed and clothe them. If they have injured us, to forgive them ; to prevent all quarrels as far as we can, to make up all differences, to quiet all conten-

* See Deut, c, xix.

nions.—So has the Almighty thought fit to guard the Life of Man, which he who taketh away, never can restore ! But life hath its portions, and he who would shudder at the bare thought of precipitately destroying a Man, may yet (by giving him trouble and vexation) *shorten his days*; and for one day lost what recompense can he make ?

But if once we are brought thus to learn the value of life, how much out of our power it is to repair all injuries committed against it, we shall naturally be led to attend with more consideration than we commonly do, to the consequences of several of our actions towards *others* of God's creatures. The lives of many are doubtless committed to our disposal. For the Peace, nay for the very existence of Society, some malefactors must necessarily lose their lives in the Execution of Justice, their offences being incompatible with the security of the lives of others. So also, in self-defence either between individuals, or in a greater degree between states and nations, many must fall by the hands of their fellow-creatures. For this we have an excuse to plead at the Mercy-Seat of God, provided we have used every means of avoiding the necessity and mitigating the rigour of the blow. For all unnecessary injury in these cases, tends to convert a pardonable violence into a sin and crime. Since Life is that, which having no power to restore, we have least right to meddle with. But besides the rest of human nature, *other creatures* in whom is the *breath of Life*, are in our power, and in a still greater degree subjected to us. But perhaps to them this Life is of more value than even to Mankind. For *Man* a future state is prepared, and *perhaps* also for the beasts that seem to us to perish; but this we have no certainty of; and if their Existence is only

only as short as their lives here below, ought we not scrupulously to fear abridging them without necessity; or embittering the little they have to enjoy, by cruelties or oppressions? If it is an offence against God to destroy the Life of Man, it is a bitter disgrace to Man, to give any unnecessary pain to the brute creation. *Man* has means of defence and the combat may be equal; *Man* has *strength* and *skill* to oppose to *violence*, *Reason* to convince *Error*, *Speech* to utter his complaints. But the *brute* creation seldom resist. They have *no reason* to guide them in their actions; and, alas! they have *no speech* to utter the many bitter complaints they have I fear to make. And yet they *must* be harmless and inoffensive, obeying only those instincts which God has implanted in them, and not being *capable* of doing us *intentional* mischief; nay, most of them contributing all their strength, and sacrificing all their comforts, to supply our wants, and provide for our necessities. Many are given to us for food, and *their* lives *must* be taken away, but all unnecessary torture in the discharge of this sad office, must be a heavy crime. The anatomy of animals of all kinds gives us every reason to suppose them capable of all bodily pains like ourselves. We, with presumptuous arrogance pretend to a great degree of merit; whenever, knowing as we commonly are able to do, for *what* we suffer, we bear it with fortitude, yet can bring ourselves to treat the sufferings of other creatures, who have *no* reason to tell them why they should submit, with carelessness or indifference, nay, oftentimes I fear with sad barbarity; for, to the disgrace of human nature, *amusement* even is made the pretence for many cruel scenes, and various animals are exposed to hard sufferings to gratify

gratify those feelings, which such sights ought naturally to disgust : it argues an unaccountable perversion of man's principles, to see him seeking pleasure in a wanton abuse of the brute creation, yet seldom or never taking any pains or care, or having any delight, in heightening or multiplying their few enjoyments. I know not what mercy those have to expect at the hands of God, who can wilfully sport with the feelings not only of an harmless uncomplaining animal, but of a creature from whom perhaps he has derived some of the greatest (and certainly the *most disinterested*) services. Nothing can be requisite but thought and consideration. For, to give unnecessary pain to an animal absolutely *incapable* of *offence*, is so hideous, so shocking, so base, so disgraceful, that it is impossible not to see the foulness of the crime. Besides, it is a sin expressly forbidden in other places of the Scripture. We are commanded to provide food and rest, and treat them with tender usage by God himself. In the book of Deuteronomy we are forbidden "to muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn*." In the Fourth Commandment we are enjoined to give *rest* not only to ourselves and our servants, but to "*our cattle.*" And in another part of the Jewish Law it is forbidden to plough with an ox and ass together, implying, that the strength of the one, not being equal to the strength of the other, it would amount to cruelty to put any beast to a work it is not well capable of performing. In many other places of Scriptures, mercy to the brute creation is strongly inculcated ; but the time admits not of my pursuing the subject further at present.

* Deut. c. xxv. v. 4.

At all events it is a matter well deserving our most serious consideration. I am well assured, that in numberless instances we all transgress this Holy Law, through a want of attention to its real and full import. You will probably be able easily to call to mind, how sadly negligent from infancy you have been at times of the feelings of others, either of your own species, or of the brute creation. It is a very unhappy circumstance, but too true a one, that children even are rather encouraged than restrained in the act of *amusing* themselves, by the destruction or unfeeling usage of dumb creatures. Indeed it is a most foul and disgraceful propensity, and if not rooted out of our nature in time, must exceedingly expose us to the wrath of God. I am sure it is included in the Commandment I have expatiated on, however we may think we stand clear of the crime of *murder*. We shall in short do right to consider that every moral virtue that can by implication be brought within the meaning of any one of the Ten Commandments, is strictly enjoined; that each is intended to comprehend every remote branch of that duty particularly expressed. And especially therefore with respect to the one we have this day more immediately been led to discuss, namely, "*thou shal't do no murder*," let us understand that it does absolutely extend to the prohibition of every unnecessary violence, and every avoidable injury, affecting the existence, the peace, the ease, and comfort of every creature into which God hath breathed the breath of Life!

THE END.

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